

Handbook of Scientology

Edited by

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Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Scientology and Conspiracism

David G. Robertson

Introduction

Scientology's emergence in the 1950s and continued expansion into the 1990s mirrors precisely the development of the Cold War, which began in the aftermath of World War 2 and had certainly ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Ball 1998: 221–237). In many ways, Scientology embodies and encapsulates the Cold War context in which it developed: its cosmology drawn from pulp science-fiction novels; the faith in the liberating power of science and technology; the corporate structuring of the organisation; the engagement with psychoanalysis. Hubbard and early Scientologists were typical of the seekers of the period, interested in Buddhism, Theosophy and other “alternative” forms of religion, and in many ways echo New Age religiosity which emerged around the same time (Urban 2012: 352–353; Grünschloß 2009). Scientology's carefully-controlled hierarchical levels of initiation seem modelled on the quasi-masonic esoteric orders which emerged following the so-called Victorian Esoteric Revival. Indeed, as Hugh Urban writes, “Scientology is best understood not as a counter-cultural rejection of mainstream America, but rather as the fulfillment (if perhaps exaggeration) of American *concerns* particularly during the decades of the Cold War” (2006: 382).

It should come as no surprise therefore that Scientology is also embroiled in another important product of that cultural matrix, popular conspiracy theories. Nurtured by the establishment of the CIA in 1947 and a Cold War fear of hidden Communist agents, conspiracy theories began to flourish in the post-war years, leaping into the popular media with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s. It is perhaps not surprising then that Scientology sees conspiracies working against it. In fact, conspiracy narratives are a recurrent but under-analysed element of the NRMS in this period, and in popular religion more generally.¹ New Religious

1 In recent years, a few works have noted the recurrence of conspiracist tropes in NRMS (Barkun 2003; Ward and Voas 2011; Dyrendal 2013; Keeley 2007). My own work aims to produce a sustained analysis of the field.

Movements (NRMs) including (but by no means limited to) Aum Shinrikyo (Repp 2004: 168–169), the Nuwaubians (Palmer 2010) and some Rastafarian groups (Partridge 2005: 318) began to incorporate conspiracist discourses, and Scientology, I will argue, was no exception.

However, more than any other NRM, the Church of Scientology has itself become the *subject* of conspiracy narratives in popular discourse. The Church is frequently described as engaged in espionage (often with good reason, as I shall show), exerting obsessive control over the flow of information and of being an elaborate fraud intended primarily to generate financial income. This chapter argues that a loop of mutual reinforcement has created; the more that Scientologists see themselves being criticised, the more they seek to control how they are perceived. In essence, the secrecy and exclusivism of Scientology is ‘blowback’, an unintended result of suspicion and resistance from many states.

However, analysing the mutual construction of these conspiracy narratives gives us the opportunity to more clearly define the edges of the shadowy Other of the implicitly contemporary Western conception of ‘real religion’. The reason that Scientology is seen as suspicious and worthy of infiltration and covert investigation is, I suggest, because of the construction of religion which we have allowed to become hegemonic: religion is divinely mandated, universally benevolent and resolutely non-profit. By focussing on Scientology’s controversies and conspiracies, we help to construct that Otherness.

Conspiracism in New Religious Movements

The flowering of NRMs in the post-War period was driven by many factors, but arguably the most significant was the widespread fear of nuclear annihilation. Following the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons in 1945, the USSR’s detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949, and the growing antagonism between the two powers, nuclear war was a clear and present threat on a daily basis for millions of people. It was certainly a concern of the nascent ‘New Age’ movement, a clear example being the Findhorn Community in the Scottish Highlands. Founded in 1962 by channeller Eileen Caddy, her husband Peter and friend Dorothy Maclean, the community – originally a single caravan on a patch of waste ground, but surviving to this day as a sizable “alternative community” – carried out meditations to act as transmitters and receivers in a telepathic “Network of Light”, made up of groups and individuals working to prepare the planet for immanent transformation (Sutcliffe 2003: 65–66). The transformation, and their practices, absolutely were driven by concern over the possibility of nuclear warfare:

There was a real danger of total nuclear holocaust if the wrong finger was on the wrong button at the wrong time. Planetary crisis on such a scale would affect the balance of the whole solar system, so certain contingency plans had been made by extra-terrestrial beings, among the more desperate of these plans was one in which groups of people were to be evacuated from chosen places around the world

CADDY 1996: 161

Such a concern was in no way unique to Findhorn, however. Many of the 'UFO religions', including the Raelians, Heaven's Gate and the Aetherius Society, reported communications with extraterrestrials who addressed the likelihood of imminent nuclear annihilation.² Hubbard was no exception, and made it clear that Scientology was a response to this new threat. While the Findhorn residents waited for UFOs to take them away from the stricken Earth, Hubbard proposed a new system for "the control of man" (1986: 538):

Scientology is such a science. It was born in the same crucible as the atomic bomb... The only race that matters at this moment is the one being run between Scientology and the atomic bomb. The history of man... may well depend on which one wins.

1997: 163

This teleological narrative of imminent nuclear apocalypse formed a significant point of confluence between the predominantly right-wing and Christian-centric conspiracist world and the more left-wing cultic milieu (Campbell 1972 [2002]). It was not the only bridge, however. Alternative medicine is frequently encountered in traditional conspiracism, as it is in NRMs and non-institutionalised forms of alternative religion (Rowbottom 2012; c.f. Sutcliffe 2003a, 174–180). Indeed, Scientology's anti-psychotherapeutic narrative can be seen as part of this same general trend. UFOs were a predominantly "religious" concern in the 1960s but had moved back into conspiracy theory discourse by the 1980s, the publication of *The Roswell Incident* (Berlitz & Moore 1980) being a significant watershed (Robertson 2014). Alternative archaeological narratives concerning Atlantis, Mu and other lost civilisations form a third commonality. From the millennial point of view, it makes sense that one might believe a golden age existed previously when one already believes that one

2 Although not concerning an NRM per se, *When Prophecy Fails* by Festinger *et al* (1956) remains the classic description of such a group, despite the problems with their methodology.

is imminent. For the conspiracist, on the other hand, if one believes that the present is a lie, it makes sense that the past would be a lie too.

The transfer between these two fields has been a mutual process; as NRMs increasingly adopts conspiracy theories, conspiracists increasingly adopt millennial discourses, talking of a “global awakening” or “transformation” (Ward & Voas 2011, 112).

Hermeneutics of Suspicion

What makes a “conspiracy theory”, however, is difficult to define. Although there have long been conspiracies, and theories about conspiracies – for example, speculation that the Bavarian Illuminati had provoked the French Revolution, which was widespread in the 18th Century (Cohn 1967: 30–31) – ‘conspiracy theory’ as the term is used today is, like Scientology, a product of the Cold War.

We owe the term to Karl Popper’s 1945 work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2, in which he outlines the “conspiracy theory of society”:

the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.

1945 [1957]: 94

Communism, he argues, peddles a “Vulgar Marxist Conspiracy Theory” (1945 [1957]: 101), which is to say, an oversimplification of Marx’s more sophisticated theory which sees both the proletariat and bourgeoisie as equally trapped by the capitalist system (1963 [2002], 167, f.n. 3). Building on Popper’s conclusions, Fredric Jameson’s oft-quoted description of conspiracy as “the poor person’s cognitive mapping... a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system” (1990, 356) again sees conspiracism as an oversimplification of the complexities of the capitalist socio-economic system. More recently, in his supposedly critical and disinterested analysis, Byford echoes Popper, concluding that the causes of “the problems of society... are more diverse and more complex than any conspiracy theorist can imagine” (2011: 156). This assumption is particularly obvious in the argument by Sunstein and Vermeule, who state that conspiracy theories “spread as a result of identifiable cognitive blunders”, “create serious risks, including risks of violence”, and propose a program of “cognitive infiltration” in which undercover

agents attempt to challenge the factual basis of such beliefs (2008, 1). Others have gone further, drawing from Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in Politics* (1964) to construct belief in conspiracy theories as evidence of mental ill-health, (e.g. Pipes 1997; Kay 2011).

A significant flaw with this line of argumentation is that while some (or perhaps many) conspiracy theories are not true, it is the case that many now-accepted historical events have at one point been regarded as conspiracy theories. Numerous examples might be marshalled, but in the last decade alone, the existence of the Bilderberg Group, the use of drones in overseas countries by the US military and the widespread interception of civilian telecommunications by intelligence agencies have all moved from being conspiracy theories to widespread coverage by mainstream news media outlets.

In fact, the term 'conspiracy theory' cannot be understood substantively, that is to say, as definable by its contents. Rather, the term's ultimate function is rhetorical (Pigden 2007: 222; Pelkmans & Machold 2011). The following example makes this function apparent. In the wake of 9–11, US President George W. Bush stated, "let us not tolerate absurd conspiracy theories". Firstly, this underlines my argument that although the official version of events itself posited a conspiracy in the legal sense by Al-Qaida, it represents an epistemic norm and is therefore not a "conspiracy theory" (Coady 2007: 132). Secondly, it implies that a good citizen should never question the government. Therefore, a conspiracy theory is "an explanation that conflicts with the account advanced by the relevant epistemic authorities", and therefore the mobilisation of the term is ultimately concerned with power (Levy 2007, 181; c.f. Sapountzis & Condor 2013, 732). By labelling a particular account a conspiracy theory, epistemic authorities including governments and scientific institutions seek to marginalise that account by portraying it as inherently irrational.

Yet the process is mutual. Those regarded as conspiracists by the epistemic authorities themselves see those authorities as involved conspiracies to marginalise and silence them. The more such conspiracies are perceived, the more that defensive action is taken. In the intelligence agency, this cycle of reinforcement is known as *blowback* refers to the unintended consequences of an attack for the aggressor, particularly in covert operations. For example, the 9–11 attacks were carried out by Al Qaeda, an organisation which was covertly funded and supported by the US during the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union (Blum 2000: 76). Just as importantly, blowback from decades of aggressive covert intelligence activity by the US has inculcated a broad public hermeneutic of suspicion across the world (Blum 2000: 77–78).

To sum up, a conspiracy theory is a mutually-constructed and reinforced dialectic construction of Otherness. Therefore, it is particularly interesting that Scientology is embroiled in conspiracy theories. In the sections which follow, I examine some specific examples of how Scientology has been constructed as conspiratorial, and some examples where Scientology perceives conspiracies working against itself. I seek to ask, whose irrational and pathological Other is Scientology?

Accusations of Conspiracy Working against Scientology

Intriguingly, Scientology begins with a conspiracy theory. Dianetics developed from Hubbard's concerns about psychoanalysis. Hubbard echoed a common narrative in popular religious discourse that psychoanalysis (in common with much contemporary medical practice) conspires to make money, rather than to heal. There was a perception that the scientific community was "an élitist group with vested interests in the promotion of particular theories and practices, unwilling to accommodate new ideas or even to give them a fair hearing" (Wallis 1976: 67).

Dianetics became Scientology between 1953 and 1954, and as the movement continued to develop, Hubbard began to insist that there was an organised opposition to Scientology, made up of psychiatrists, government agencies like the CIA and FBI, and anti-cult groups (Urban 2011: 167; Cusack 2012: 305). His successor, David Miscavage, went further, stating that "every single detractor on there is part of a religious hate group called Cult Awareness Network... its the same as the KKK would be with the blacks" (cited in Cusack 2012: 306). This in turn leads to a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding non-scientological society at large. In this section I examine two examples of how this has been operationalised in Scientology: the "fair game" diktat which saw many of the Church's detractors reciprocally attacked by the Church, and Operation Snow White, in which the Church was convicted of covertly infiltrating the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to restrict their ability to investigate Scientology's financial operations.

Fair Game

Perhaps developing out of his fears of Communist infiltration into the US, Hubbard had become concerned with the threat of subversion within the

organisation as early as the 1950s. He established an 'Ethics Branch' who carried out 'Security Checks' (Sec Checks) designed to identify 'suppressive persons' (SPs) who threatened the Church by revealing Scientological teachings without authority or questioning Hubbard's authority (Urban 2006: 374).

This concern with subversion also applied to non-Scientologists. In a policy letter dated 18th October 1967, Hubbard outlined a strategy named 'Fair Game'. He stated that anyone considered to be a serious threat to the Church of Scientology were open to being "deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist", including being "tricked, sued or lied to or destroyed" (Wallis 1976: 144). It was essentially a policy of 'no quarter' against its enemies:

no Scientologist may be brought before a Committee of Evidence or punished for any action taken against a Suppressive Person or Group during the period that person or group is 'fair game'

HUBBARD 1968A: 49

In particular, Hubbard recommended that the personal affairs of the attackers be investigated, and anything potentially unsavoury exposed, so that it "recoils on the attacker" (Hubbard 1966a). These activities were particularly the concern of the Guardian's Office, founded in 1966 to "TO HELP LRH ENFORCE AND ISSUE POLICY, TO SAFEGUARD SCIENTOLOGY ORGS, SCIENTOLOGISTS AND SCIENTOLOGY AND TO ENGAGE IN LONG TERM PROMOTION" (Hubbard 1966b). The first Guardian was Hubbard's wife, Mary Sue.

Sec Checks and Fair Game were both officially cancelled in 1968, part of a series of reforms (Urban 2006: 375). Yet the policy letter makes it clear that this cancellation is in name only: "FAIR GAME may not appear on any Ethics Order. It causes bad public relations" (Hubbard 1968b). Indeed, the church of Scientology continued to defend the practice as a protected "religious expression" long after the official cancellation (Urban 2011: 109). Investigative reporters Bryan Seymour (Doherty 2014: 46) and John Sweeney of the BBC seem to have been singled out for such treatment since 2009, to take only two well-supported examples. Similarly, according to accounts from a number of apostates, Sec Checks have not only continued, but become even more aggressive (Headley 2009: 75–76; Cusack 2012: 309).

Operation Snow White

This embattled position quickly led some high-ranking Scientologists into committing actual crimes. As early as 1960, Hubbard encouraged Scientologists to

attempt to occupy posts in government offices with the intention of advancing the interests of the Church (Urban 2006: 377). Fifteen years later, Jane Kember (the Church's 'Guardian Worldwide') issued a directive against the IRS, which in addition to litigation and aggressive public relations involved infiltration of the Washington Office. This was named 'Operation Snow White', allegedly by Hubbard himself (Atack 1990: 227). Gerald Wolfe was employed as a typing clerk in the IRS' Washington DC office, where he stole more than 30,000 pages of documents, largely relating to their investigations of Scientology (Urban 2011: 167–168). The Guardian's Office also managed to plant a microphone in the Chief Counsel Office of the IRS (Urban 2011: 168). Their plan was to learn the strategy of the IRS, so that they could then counter it in their defence (Atack 1990: 229). By January 1975, there were also agents of the Guardian's Office within the Coast Guard and the Drug Enforcement Office, and later the Justice Department (Atack 1990: 224 & 230–231). Further documents were stolen from the Justice Department in break-ins, often going through the Bar Association Library at the US Courthouse. (Atack 1990: 231–236).

The librarian became suspicious, however, and on June 11th 1976, Michael Meisner and Gerald Wolfe (AKA "Silver") were questioned by FBI agents at the library before they could gain access to the Justice Department offices. Although they managed to talk their way out, Wolfe was arrested immediately afterwards. Meisner, however, went on the run. He was initially aided by the Guardian's Office, but Mary Sue Hubbard later insisted he turn himself in, and present a cover story to direct attention away from the Hubbards. When he refused, he was effectively placed under house arrest by the Guardian's Office. He managed to escape, was re-captured, and escaped again. This time he went straight to the FBI and confessed (Atack 1990: 236–239).

In July 1977, the FBI raided three Scientology centres (in Washington DC, Los Angeles and Hollywood), an operation which was the largest in the agency's history (Urban 2006: 378). In 1979, eleven people including Mary Sue Hubbard, were convicted of conspiracy, and sentenced to imprisonment. Hubbard was named as an "unindicted co-conspirator", which incited him to go into retreat in international waters aboard his private yacht, where he would remain until his death in 1986. The church argued that the investigation was an attack on their first Amendment right to religious freedom, something which the court were particularly scathing of in their conclusions (Urban 2011: 169–170).

This court-case had numerous implications for the later development of Scientology. It confirmed both that there were conspiracies against the church to Scientologists, and that the Church was engaged in criminal conspiracies in the public eye. Indeed, the church was far more in the public spotlight after these events. Furthermore, it let David Miscavige gain control of the

organisation, who has if anything increased both the secrecy within the organisation and the aggressiveness of attacks upon those outside the Church.

Conspiracy Theories Involving Scientology

However, etic constructions of conspiracy against Scientology are mirrored by emic constructions of Scientology as a conspiracy itself. As Russell Miller put it, “the FBI was quite as paranoid about Hubbard as Hubbard was about the FBI” (1987: 198). As well as the investigations in the US by the FBI and IRS, an investigation against the Dianetics centre in Paris between 1970 to 1978 resulted in Hubbard being charged and sentenced *in absentia* to four years in prison for fraud (Palmer 2009: 300). These investigations have led to a construction of Scientology as a conspiracy, a ‘cult’ designed to make money, rather than a ‘legitimate religion’.

Secondly, a great deal of doubt has been cast upon much of Hubbard’s accounts of his life, later canonised by Scientology in a form described by Christensen as “hagiography” (2005: 233 ff). In particular, there is strong evidence that Hubbard’s war records have been falsified to support his fraudulent claims to have been injured at duty and awarded medals for valour (Wright 2011). Furthermore, Hubbard’s brief but eventful involvement with Aleister Crowley between 1945 and 1946 has come to light. Hubbard befriended Jack Parsons, a brilliant aeronautical engineer and head of the Los Angeles lodge of Crowley’s *Ordo Templi Orientis*, and began collaborating in his occult workings (Urban 2012: 337). These included Hubbard channelling and reporting “astral vision[s]” while attempting to incarnate the goddess Babalon in the form of “the Moonchild”, something which the elderly Crowley was less than enthusiastic about (Urban 2012: 343–344). The relationship ended in 1946 when Hubbard and Parson’s former girlfriend fled in a yacht purchased largely with Parson’s money (Urban 2012: 344). Such a revisionist historical narrative has often been mobilised to argue that a) Hubbard was capable of deliberate dishonesty for financial gain, and b) that he could not therefore have produced ‘genuine’ revelatory materials. This of course assumes that ‘genuine’ revelations exist, although presumably only to those with a particular moral stance.

The connection with Crowley is interesting in another respect also. Crowley seems to have considered it his mission to found a religion, as he stated to Clifford Bax in 1905, adding that “in one hundred years, the world will be sitting in the sunset of Crowleyanity” (Kaczynski 2010: 134, 596). He founded or significantly reformed a number of potential religions during his career, including

Thelema, The A.: A.; Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica and the Ordo Templi Orientis, the latter being the most successful during his lifetime.

Hubbard seems to have taken Crowley's religious entrepreneurship further, however. In 1949, Hubbard is reported as saying "I'd like to start a religion. That's where the money is!" (Urban 2011: 58).³ While Crowley struggled to attract adherents to his several organisations, Scientology has been considerably more successful. As Pendle puts it, Scientology "is, in short, everything Crowley had wanted the OTO to be" (2005: 237).⁴

However, Hubbard's earliest Dianetics material is very critical of religion, and Christianity in particular, which he described "as making people into victims" (cited in Urban 2011: 58). Furthermore, religion was presented – rather conspiratorially – as an organised program to dominate people by lying to them:

[R]eligion is always different than truth. It has to be. Because the only way you can control a people is to lie to them.

CITED IN URBAN 2011: 57

By 1953, however, Hubbard was interested in 'rebranding' Scientology as a religion. Writing to Helen O'Brien, head of the Hubbard Association of Scientologists in April 1953, Hubbard wrote:

We don't want a clinic. We want one in operation but not in name. Perhaps we could call it a Spiritual Guidance Center... I await your reaction on the religion angle. In my opinion, we couldn't get worse public opinion than we have had or have less customers with what we've got to sell. A religious charter would be necessary in Pennsylvania or NJ to make it stick. But I sure could make it stick. We're treating the present time beingness, psychotherapy treats the past and the brain. And brother, that's religion, not mental science

CITED IN URBAN 2011: 65

3 As Urban notes, a number of sources report Hubbard making similar statements, including his son L. Ron Jr and a number of members of Hubbard's science-fiction circle in the 1940s.

4 It is certainly interesting that two of the most successful Western post-War NRMs – Scientology and Wicca – have clear connections to Crowley. It is intriguing to ask whether the concern with the secret teachings of both the Western Esoteric tradition and Eastern traditions inherited from Crowley encouraged the popularity of conspiracy narratives in post-war NRMs.

The “religious angle” seems to have been positively received, as the 1955 incorporation certificate of the Founding Church of Scientology in Washington DC states that Scientology was now a “religious faith” (Urban 2011: 65).

Yet Hubbard was also clear that Scientology should be a commercial enterprise (Urban 2011: 132–133). By the late 1950s, Hubbard was allegedly earning some \$250,000 a year from the Church of Scientology (Miller 1987: 227). In 1993, the year in which it gained tax-exempt status in the US, the international organisation was valued at \$398 million (Urban 2011: 137). Achieving the level of OT VIII was estimated in 1991 and costing on average \$365,000 (Behar 1991: 50–57), while a 2009 estimate put the cost closer to half a million dollars (Wright 2011). The *New Yorker* article reported several apostates describing Miscavige as profiting unduly from Scientology, including travelling in private jets, having an entourage of personal staff and dressing in tailored clothes (Wright 2011).

In recent years, however, accusations have tended to focus less on large scale financial fraud, and more on smaller scale human rights abuses. 2009 is often seen as a kind of watershed in how the media covered the Church of Scientology. As well as the publication of two high-profile accounts by apostates – Marc Headley’s *Blown for Good: Behind the Iron Curtain of Scientology* and Nancy Many’s *My Billion Year Contract: Memoir of a Former Scientologist* – journalists Joe Childs and Thomas C. Tobin’s investigative articles in the St Petersburg Times detailed accusations from apostates, most notably of violence perpetrated by Miscavige, and detailed some of the Church’s earlier scandals. These pieces were instrumental in the high-profile defection of Academy Award-winning director and screenwriter Paul Haggis, which was covered in an article in the New York Times (Wright 2011). High-profile television reports in Australia have repeated accusations of forced labour, imprisonment and even forced abortion in the Sea Org (or ‘Sea Organisation’), Scientology’s naval-themed elite inner-order (Doherty 2014: 44). There have also been accusations of child abuse (Doherty 2014: 48). Other accusations have bordered on the bizarre, such as the accusation that David Miscavige’s wife Shelley has been ‘disappeared’ by the church. She has not been seen in public since 2007, and some former Sea Org members have alleged that she is being held against her will in San Jacinto, California (Wright 2013: 303). However, when this was reported to the LAPD by actress Leah Remini, investigators were able to make contact with her, and the case was “classified as unfounded” (Dillon 2013). As Susan Palmer notes, these accusations are common in media portrayals of NRMs and their perception by enforcement agencies (2004: 65, 71; 2010). As Doherty notes, these issues are taboos of the target audience, and provoke indignation and fascination in equal measure (2014: 50).

In several cases, however, this construction of Scientology has led to legislation being passed. In 1963, Australian Labour Party leader J.W. Galbally introduced a private member's bill designed to restrict Scientology's commercial activities. In a speech before the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Victoria, he described Scientology as "a group of charlatans who for monetary gain are exposing children of a tender age, youths and adults to intimidation and blackmail, insanity and even suicide, family estrangement and bankruptcy" (Doherty 2014: 39). In the French context, this sometimes lead to Scientology being described as "escroc" – a fraud (Palmer 2011: 316). Palmer suggests that the particularly aggressive moves against Scientology in France are motivated by the perception that Scientology is quintessentially American, and that along with other "sectes", Scientology operates as a "Trojan Horse" allowing US corporations (and possibly even the CIA) to infiltrate French government and conduct espionage (2011: 311, 315). Tellingly, Heber Jentsch, President of the International Church of Scientology, described the investigations as a "conspiracy of the French Intelligence Service" (Palmer 2009: 300).

Anonymous

A more recent example of Scientology being portrayed as a conspiracy is the ongoing campaign by Anonymous, a decentralised Internet-based group of 'hacktivists'. They are ostensibly self-appointed defenders of free speech and freedom of religion, yet there is a morally normative agenda at work too. A direct predecessor of Anonymous called the Church of the Dead Cow launched an ongoing campaign against Scientology in 1995, claiming "We fear plans for a 'Fourth Reich' to be established on our home soil under the vise-like grip of oppression known as Scientology" (cited in Cusack 2012: 306). Anonymous' campaign against Scientology is nicknamed "Project Chanology" (Cusack 2012: 307), and similarly demonstrates this tension between protecting net neutrality and attacking a "dangerous cult" in order to protect the vulnerable. As the following quotation makes apparent, the anti-censorship rhetoric is a veneer over other concerns:

Hello, leaders of scientology... Your campaigns of misinformation, your suppression of dissent, your litigious nature, all of these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest *propaganda video* into mainstream circulation the extent of your malign influence... has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your

organisation should be destroyed, *for the good of your followers, for the good of mankind, and for our own enjoyment.*

Cited in CUSACK 2012: 307. Emphasis added

Unusually, Project Chanology has escaped into the real world, in the form of protests outside Scientology premises around the world, with protesters frequently wearing Guy Fawkes masks in reference to the graphic novel *v for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and Alan Lloyd and its later film adaptation. There is a clear parallel between Anonymous' tactics in this respect with those of the Church of Scientology, silencing dissent by any means necessary, and mobilising groups of the faithful when required. Anonymous do not seem aware of the irony that they are attempting to silence Scientology in the name of free speech. Moreover, they seem to exclude Scientology from their notion of religion, and its freedom they claim to defend. It is as though they are arguing that religious freedom is a good thing – just as long as it is a 'real religion'.

In short, Scientology's critics are every bit as conspiratorial as its supporters. Being paranoid doesn't mean someone's not out to get you.

Blowback

Events like the War on Sectes, Project Chanology, and so on, have created blowback, reinforcing the very behaviours they criticise. Scientology's move towards a more obviously 'religious' identity came in the wake of the 1960s investigations by the FBI and IRS. In keeping with its embodiment of the US context, this meant dressing itself in Christian symbols, including a cross-like 'logo', clerical collars, centers renamed 'chapels', and so on (Urban 2006: 377). This increased the suspicions of outsiders, encouraging Scientology towards ever-greater secrecy.

As Doherty notes, media coverage – or "newsworthiness" – is driven by four factors: negativity, which is essentially the fact that the media favours sensational headlines that reinforce stereotypes of unorthodoxy; *resonance*, the degree to which the story meshes with the broader concerns of the target market; *rarity*, wherein the novelty value of certain stories makes them more appealing; and *conceptual clarity*, the ease with which the story is translated into simple binaries and described clearly in a short format (2014: 51). Scientology obviously fits these factors rather well, to judge by the sheer number of reports, particularly since the 1990s, but going back to the earliest days of the church. Conspiracy is prominent among these concerns, particularly where it

is combined with abuse, and it is tempting to see the shift from critiques of Scientology focussing on financial impropriety to critiques focussing on human rights abuses as taking place during the 1980s, as the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare was occurring.

But has the secrecy ballooned Scientology's importance? Although we may dismiss the popular media's portrayal of Scientology as uninformed, sensational or even crass (Doherty 2014: 49), we scholars are nevertheless implicated. We too revel in the sensationalist aspects, as the contents of the volume you are holding demonstrate. As Ann Taves and Michael Kinsella have recently described, because of entrenched patterns of thinking about and classifying religions (the example they give is the typology of church/sect/cult derived from Ernst Troeltsch) certain data has remained hidden from the sociological lens (2014: 87). The case of Scientology, however, is the direct opposite to this phenomenon; if anything, Scientology is over-represented in the scholarly literature. The sensational nature of much of the material belies the fact that numerically speaking, Scientology is 'small beer'. Although the church claim eight million members worldwide, the truth is somewhat less:

A survey of American religious affiliations, compiled in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, estimates that only twenty-five thousand Americans actually call themselves Scientologists. That's less than half the number who identify themselves as Rastafarians.

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Indeed, the numbers seem to have been in steady decline since the 1990s (Urban 2011: 206). The 2011 census in England and Wales showed that only 2,418 self-identified as Scientologists.⁵ It is likely that a larger number turned up to protest outside Scientology offices around the country during Operation Chanoology. Why are the press and groups like Anonymous prepared to be more openly and enthusiastically critical of Scientology than other NRMs, nurturing this conspiratorial dialectic? I suggest because, implicitly, it is not considered to be a "real religion".

There are a number of factors which may contribute to such a construction. For one, the average Scientologist is white and wealthy, perhaps unsettling a received idea of members of NRMs being youthful 'dropouts'. Wealthy, white, successful adults may pose a greater threat to society, as they possess more power, and are therefore potentially more able to subvert society from within

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/datablog/interactive/2012/dec/11/census-religion> (Accessed 9/7/2014).

(Palmer 2004: 72). This may also play into the fascination with Scientology's celebrity members.

The courting of celebrities also plays into a second factor – that the ostentatious and showy aesthetic of the Church of Scientology is taken by many to be gaudy or even crass. The underlying issue here would appear to be that such an aesthetic is not considered to be suitably 'reverent' for a 'real' religion. Perhaps, as a cultural product of the postwar US, Scientology perhaps lacks the exoticism which enables the more flamboyant aspects of, for example, Hinduism to be orientalist away. Furthermore, Scientology's use of symbols and terminology which frequently mimic Christian ones may mean it is not quite exotic enough to orientalise and therefore neuter.

Perhaps most importantly, however, as suggested above, Scientology may be denied the status of a 'real religion' because it is perceived as aiming principally to make money. This is clearly demonstrated in Australian Senator Nick Xenophon's 2009 statement that "Scientology is not a religious organisation. It is a criminal organisation that hides behind its so-called religious beliefs" (Doherty 2014: 44–45). Surprisingly, this kind of polarisation is frequently found in academia, even among scholars who know better. For example, a section in a paper by Susan Palmer is "Religion *or* Commercial Enterprise?" (2009: 304, emphasis added). These claims take part in an either/or discourse which states that Scientology must either be a religion or exist to make money, as though those were necessarily incompatible positions. This seems to be a legacy of the Protestant heritage of the study of religion; although Weber famously argued that Protestant theology allowed for the pursuit of the pecuniary as well as the spiritual, not so the conspicuous spending of it (1930). Nevertheless, this indicates a popular perception that the gap between God and humanity is wide, and therefore concerns as mundane as money must therefore be beyond the purview of religion. However, power is certainly an issue also, as it is less common for the Catholic Church to be described as "not a real religion", despite it making a considerable amount of money from its practitioners and having been involved in financial fraud in the past.⁶

Scientologist Apostate Nancy Many betrays another aspect to the issue of money when she writes "[b]ecause of the prices, it seemed more of an elitist group rather than one that was working to help all mankind" (2009: 189). Like many others, she sees a 'real' religion has having a universal mission of 'salvation'. Again, this is a particularly Protestant Christian perspective, and

6 The 'P2' scandal of the early 1980s, for example. See Cornwell Rupert (1983). *God's Banker: The Life and Death of Roberto Calvi*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

moreover, one which would deny Judaism and Hinduism the status of 'real religions', to take two obvious examples. Moreover, it ignores Scientology's self-appointed mission to 'clear the world' (Hubbard 1962).

However, Palmer strikes a cautionary note, suggesting that Scientology's financial motivations may have been overestimated. Perhaps social legitimacy is of greater importance to the organisation than money *per se*, but that wealth has been seen as granting social status (Palmer 2009 :295). Certainly, there has an assumption, particularly in the legislative sphere, that by granting Scientology the 'status' of 'religion', we are somehow granting it legitimacy (Grünschloß 2009: 228). Such a status, it seems, retains real power in the contemporary West.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories represent not an increase in dissent, as is sometimes argued, but rather an increase in consensus. The more clearly defined the consensus, the more easily identified is the alternative – the Other – and the more readily stigmatised it may be as a result. The significance of conspiracy theories therefore lies in their dialectical relationships with societal norms, as they mark the boundaries of the implicit or 'common sense' understandings of what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' in their particular social contexts.

In the case of Scientology, as I have presented here, conspiracy theories have helped to mark the boundaries between 'real' religions and 'fraudulent' ones. I have argued that the prominence of Scientology in conspiracy theory narratives in fact tells us little about Scientology itself. Rather, it tells us quite a bit about what 'religion' – or at least, 'real religion' – means in popular usage in the contemporary West. It means historically mandated on a 'genuine' revelation from a person of highly – dare I say – Christian moral fibre with a proselytizing but non-pecuniary agenda.

The accusation that Scientology is conspiring to make money or even to destroy society is part of a broader discourse as to what makes a religion legitimate. Like it or not, we scholars are implicated. We reinforce such judgements implicitly through continuing to use either/or for profit/for salvation dichotomies, or applying different standards to New Religious Movements and "World Religions", or universally applying specifically Christian terms such as "faith". These strategic moves create the Us from which our conspiratorial Other is constructed. Scientology therefore offers an illuminating case study on the flashpoints in the discourse on how 'religion' is constructed, both by the public and by academics.

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